WRITERS MOSAIC

Living reinvention

Franklin Nelson

I can't claim to remember how old I was when I first heard the name Malcolm X, but it must have been around the time, aged 14, that I decided to obtain a copy of his *Autobiography*. Having passed, up till that point, through most of the world as a white person, I was becoming more curious about the other half of my history. So I spent time with works by Maya Angelou, James Baldwin and Malorie Blackman, as well as Caryl Phillips, Sam Selvon and Benjamin Zephaniah, colouring in parts of myself that had until then been, if not blank, then at the very least muted.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X, though, had a particular pull when I came to learn of its existence. It wasn't fiction. It told of a life. The title was simple and short, but the definite article made it authoritative. And the author's name. Malcolm: almost out of place as a given name in the 21st century. X: a letter, one of the simplest to write, that also works as a kiss or in a mathematical expression, to cross a possibility out or to mark the right spot.

I didn't go in search of the book because I wanted an education in the Black struggle in the United States (although I must have realised that I would learn some facts about it, and be presented with a particular interpretation). Nor did I expect the book to offer me answers as to how to live. Instead, I went in search of it because I wanted to know more about this charismatic black man, dead well before his time, with the intriguing, somewhat unknowable name.

At the time bookshops just about still held the upper hand over online retailers, so in I went one Saturday morning to my local branch of Waterstones to find a copy. On the shelves were books about the other, more 'respectable', 'M' of 20th-century American history – Martin Luther King. But Malcolm X wasn't to be found, so I placed an order for the *Autobiography* and returned a couple of weeks later to collect it. When I went back, the bookseller seemed bemused that someone of my age, or colour, or both, could or would want to read the title she was putting through the till in this solidly middle-class part of England, where one of the store's main draws was its bookless, airless café. When I got home, my father took one look at what I'd bought and called it a 'heavy book'. At more than 500 pages it was big, but he didn't mean to get at its size. Their scepticism, transmitted in different ways, only made me want to begin reading more.

Picking up my Penguin Modern Classics copy today, just over a decade since my eyes first scanned its pages, I am reminded how I was struck back then not just – or not even principally – by the statements Malcolm X makes and the stories he recovers, but rather by the clarity and force with which he does so. Even as they wrestle with difficult memories or advance complex ideas, his sentences are spare. Many of them are grammatically simple, spurning excess description and long words. 'They seemed to be nearly always at odds,' he observes of his mother and father in 'Nightmare', the opening chapter. 'Sometimes my father would beat her. It might have had something to do with the fact that my mother had a pretty good education.' For an unashamedly political testimony, the book is also knowingly funny, as when Malcolm X describes dodging military induction by donning a 'wild' zoot suit and fashioning his hair into 'a reddish bush of conk'. He recalls dryly: 'the stony-faced rest of them looked as if they were ready to sign up to go off killing somebody – they would have liked to start with me'. In these and other moments, style is not at odds with or seeking to get one over on or playing second fiddle to substance. The two are equals.

The *Autobiography* is revealing as much for what it does not tell the reader or dwell on as for that which it does. This is the result both of Malcolm X's 'own evasions' and the 'subtle shapings' made by co-writer Alex Haley, as the historian Manning Marable has noted. For me, one hundred years after the birth of Malcolm Little, his

big book's relevance to our time lies in part in the space between what it shares and what it conceals. When do we really know or tell, or want to know or tell, the full story about anything, and is it our right to know? Malcolm X's was, to quote the subtitle of Marable's biography, 'a life of reinvention'. Why can't our lives be too?

Franklin Nelson works at the *Financial Times*, commissioning and writing on UK politics, the economy and society as well as books and the arts. His reviews, features and essays have been published by the *TLS*, the *London Review of Books* and *Wasafiri*.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk